Framing the use of performance measurement in universities: the paradox of business disciplines

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores how performance-management systems are understood and framed through the use of rhetoric and language within universities, where not-for-profit, charitable goals are (or should be) central. It addresses the issues of: how strategic rhetorical frames are used by university actors; and how these relate to actors' primary frames and reactions to performance-management practices. The study focuses on the case of UK universities, taking into consideration both old and newer institutions.

Design/methodology/approach: This study adopts a case-study approach, relying on 28 interviews with key-academic actors involved in the design and implementation of university performance-management systems in four UK universities.

Findings: The research highlights the important effect of primary frames over the strategic frames that are mobilised to achieve desired outcomes or individual advantage. In Business disciplines, the consistency between actors' primary frames and managerial and performance-management tools introduced into universities makes such disciplines a fertile ground for these practices to be embraced. This is not the case with Natural Sciences.

Practical implications: While framing a new practice consistently with existing/prevailing primary frames may be a winning strategy in the short term, in the long term, those tasked with introducing new practices should consider that the prevalence of a certain view of the world has the potential to hamper innovation and learning.

Originality/value: The paper contributes to advance our understanding of the interaction between individual primary and strategic frames, as well as academic staff's reactions and interpretations of performance-management practices in universities as knowledge-intensive, not-for-profit organisations.

Key words: universities, framing, performance management

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the way universities are managed has significantly changed in many countries. These organisations, which are generally not-for-profit and mission driven (and indeed charitable in the UK where the field research contained in this paper was conducted), have frequently been urged to become 'more commercial' and adopt business-like practices (Guthrie and Neumann, 2007; Parker, 2012, 2020; Gebreiter and Hidayah, 2017; Argento et al., 2020). A common recurring theme in official steering pronouncements regarding universities is that there needs to be greater focus on performance management and quantifiable results for both individuals and organisations (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012; Guarini et al., 2020). Consequently, largely driven by managerial ideas, many publically-funded organisations (and governments) have sought to develop (or impose) performance measures and targets on universities.

Key facets of a managerial approach to performance measurement and management (for convenience, hereafter referred to as performance management) are often related to a production model of performance utilising such terms as input, output and impact (The W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). In this scenario, standards of expected performance across various criteria are established and actual performance is evaluated against the defined benchmarks. Here, 'good' performance is rewarded, while 'poor' performance is penalised, with emphasis placed on what universities are 'producing', not just on what they are spending. This frequently has implications in terms of funding levels to the university or in relation to tenure and promotion decisions for individuals (Du and Lapsley, 2019; Kallio et al., 2020). It is often maintained that performance information of this nature is necessary to improve management within, and accountability by, universities, with these ideas having clearly impacted on the sector (Parker, 2013; Muller, 2018; Grossi et al., 2019). However, despite the fact that such processes may be encouraged (or even mandated) by government and/or other controlling forces, strong negative reactions by individuals within universities have also been registered. Frequently, the opposition is related to the perceived dangers (and consequences) of mission drift, whereby academics themselves view that universities are being steered towards actions that undermine traditional values and ways of operating (Gebreiter and Hidayah, 2017; Grossi et al., 2019; Kallio et al., 2020).

Within universities, at the individual level, performance-management systems are intricately linked with actors' behaviours (Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015). Understanding the way individuals translate and frame performance-management practices is important to predict future reactions, oppositions and effects. However, the role individuals play in such translating and framing has been, so far, little investigated. To address this gap, the paper explores how performance-management systems within universities are understood and framed by different actors through the use of language. The study specifically addresses the following research questions: (i) how are strategic rhetorical frames used by university actors, and (ii) how do these relate to actors' primary frames and reactions to performance-management practices?

The study focuses on the case of four UK universities, taking into consideration both older and newer, post-1992[1], institutions. The UK university sector is significant in terms of, among other things, number of institutions (165), student (over two million) and staff (430,000) numbers, and total income (over £38 billion) (Universities UK, 2021). The research contributes to highlight the effect of primary frames (related to actors' initial beliefs, cultural norms and core values) over potentially more-instrumental strategic frames (Goffman, 1974; Snow and Benford, 2000) that can be mobilised to achieve desired outcomes or individual advantage. This advances our understanding of the interaction between individual primary and strategic frames, as well as the role and impact of recent performance-management changes in universities. While the field work for this study is UK-focussed, given the widespread international momentum towards intensely embedding performance-management systems in universities, the issues that it explores are of concern globally. Moreover, although prior research on UK universities has examined the impact of specific government policies, such as research evaluation (Glass et al., 1996; Broadbent and Laughlin, 2009, ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012), and managerial reforms implementation in old and

new universities (Du and Lapsley, 2019), this study takes a different approach. Quite uniquely, it centres on individual framing and interpretation of performance management in different disciplines within universities.

The reminder of the paper is organised as follows: the next section discusses vocabularies and rationales relating to performance management in the UK university system, where the field work is located. Subsequently, previous studies on performance management in a university context are detailed, and the theoretical lenses used to analyse the qualitative data are explained. Following this, the methodology is presented, before introducing findings, discussion, and, finally, conclusions and contribution of the paper.

2. Vocabularies behind the management of research and teaching in the UK university context

Recent studies published by Universities UK (2017, 2019 and 2021) show that universities represent an important share of the UK economy. It was estimated that the higher-education sector generates approximately £95 billion of gross output per annum and 940,000 full-time equivalent jobs to the economy as a whole. In 2017-2018, the total revenue earned by UK universities amounted to £38.2 billion. This was comparable, in sectoral gross output terms, to the advertising and market research industry and the legal services industry, and larger than the basic pharmaceuticals sector. Another notable aspect of higher-education's impact is its ability to attract expenditure and investment from overseas through the enrolment of international students, who generate, approximately, 25% of total teaching income.

In 2015, the UK central government and the Department for Business Innovation & Skills (BIS)[2] issued a Green (consultation) paper, followed by a White (policy) paper in 2016, outlining how the government would seek to reshape the higher-education landscape and redistribute funding in relation to both the output and the social impact of universities (BIS, 2015 and 2016). This moved, on the teaching side, towards the introduction of a Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) and, in terms of research, towards the strengthening of the role of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (the last of which was concluded in 2020). The REF is an external management control system, which replaced the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). A range of ideas and vocabularies originating from management literature and managerial approaches provided a leitmotif throughout both the Green (discussion) and White (policy) papers. Examples of this focus were: the notion that metrics were important as a basis for driving change; a competitive environment was viewed in very positive terms; improved performance by universities was required to maintain/progress the UK position in worldwide university rankings; quantitative data were required to support students in making informed decisions regarding applications; and a range of underpinning external pressures could support the delivery of value for money to students and taxpayers. For instance, and with respect to the White (policy) paper (BIS, 2016):

> *'By introducing more competition and informed choice into higher education, we will deliver better outcomes and value for students, employers and the taxpayers who underwrite the system.'* (p.8)

> *'We must establish a robust framework for gathering the information to measure teaching in its broadest sense, just as we did for research with the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise in the 1980s, predecessor to the current Research Excellence Framework (REF). We have long accepted the principle of funding research on the basis of quality. We will now extend this to teaching.'* (p.12)

Overall, this suggests that business-like, managerial, ideas, such as value for money, income generation and productivity, are encouraged to challenge the traditional focus on education and students' development in the UK university setting. An example of how such ideas have influenced UK universities is visible in the way they craft their TEF submissions (Matthews and Kotzee,

2019). In teaching, the TEF seeks to assess the quality of undergraduate teaching, and its first results were published in June 2017. This is a government assessment (mandatory in England, optional elsewhere in the UK) which, in the future, may be used to determine whether state-funded providers are permitted to raise tuition fees. Evaluations are based on statistics such as dropout rates, student satisfaction survey results and graduate employment rates. Universities are rated as Gold ('consistently outstanding'), Silver ('high quality') and Bronze ('satisfactory quality'), or, if they do not meet a minimum 'quality' threshold, they will receive no award at all. The 'initial hypothesis' for the ratings is based on six core metrics (see Table 1). A cacophony of concerns has been expressed, both within and outside of the sector, in relation to the TEF's operation and impact (Ashwin, 2018; Russell Group, 2019). Most striking is the question about whether it really measures teaching quality at all, with there being no actual inspections of teaching; TEF is largely a paper-based exercise drawing on available data and written submissions from universities. Moreover, it is frequently argued that TEF is not difficult to 'game'. The Royal Statistical Society (2019) itself published a view, communicated to government and more widely, that the TEF has statistical issues that are so major that it is (p.1) 'likely to mislead students who use TEF to inform their university choices'. Quite a conclusion by, what is normally perceived as, a very conservative society not given to hyperbole.

Table 1

In research, the RAE was an exercise that began in the early 1980s to evaluate the quality of university research undertaken. The results were used to inform higher-education funding councils. RAE submissions from each subject area (unit of assessment) were given a rank by a subject-specialist peer review panel. Assessments took place in 1986, 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008. This was replaced by the REF in 2014. This revised approach was claimed to be an 'impact evaluation' with the stated aims being (REF, 2019): to provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits; to provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the sector and for public information; and to inform the selective allocation of research funding. For universities, the REF process creates challenges in both the ranking of published research (a contentious issue, see: ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012; van Helden and Argento, 2020) and the development of impact case studies[3]. One feature of the ranking of published research is the highly-questionable tendency for universities, when managing the REF process, to use impact factors or ranking lists of journals (where available) to categorise the excellence of publications located in those journals. Certainly, this is an easier way to operate, and one that is likely to be embraced by central-university managers whose subject-specific knowledge of academic research is likely to be limited and who may wish to exert control over academics. This is, however, an approach with many obvious major weaknesses (Muller, 2018). Given this, it is refreshing to see the emergence of, and in the last decade some momentum related to adhering to, the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment[4] (American Society for Cell Biology, 2013) that seeks to restrict/eliminate such practices.

3. Previous research on performance management in universities

Previous research has suggested that the strict measurement culture that has developed over time across the university sector has led to counter-productive outcomes, and the managerial oversight of academic work has reached a critical tipping point (Craig et al., 2014). As early as 1997, Prichard and Willmott (1997) noted the omnipresence of the managerial discourse within the UK higher-education sector and critiqued its negative effects. Reflecting on current practice internationally, it has been argued that we need to think about measurement, management and accountability in ways that embrace more-responsible features of collegial control, and that we need to supplement brute calculable accountability with compassion, social welfare, social responsibility, equity and trust (Craig et al., 2014). While it is accepted that outputs and performance matter to academics,

and indeed to wider society, the issue of accountability for such outputs should not be separated from clarity about the overall role of universities (Parker, 2011). Moreover, it is contended that relying on excessively close ties with business-like models (which current university performance-management practices are accused of doing) is likely to imperil the core principles without which universities become merely adjuncts to corporate power (Parker, 2020).

Ter Bogt and Scapens (2012), comparing performance-management systems used by Business disciplines in UK and Dutch universities, identified a shift, over time, from developmental uses of performance measures towards more judgemental uses of the same. They found that more quantitative measurement and management processes that had developed (via the embracing of a judgemental approach) only gave an illusion of objectivity and transparency, frequently merely relocating subjectivities in assessment, rather than removing them. More worryingly, it was argued that these subjectivities were now located at a greater distance (more centrally within the university) from individual academics, rather than within their discipline area, and exercised by individuals who were unlikely to know the subject and academics' work well; this was viewed in very negative terms. A shift from developmental to judgemental forms of performance management echoed ideas similar to those by Broadbent and Laughlin (2009), when constructing a conceptual framework of performance-management systems, ranging from 'transactional' (akin to judgemental) to 'relational' (akin to developmental). These researchers warned about the possible unsuitability of an over-focus on transactional approaches in a university setting. Similar themes emerged, in an even more-pronounced fashion, in the later work of Du and Lapsley (2019) as they studied managerial practices in two UK universities. In particular, they examined the importance of calculative practices in performance management and the extent to which these impacted on the everyday lives of academics. They found that a focus on quantification and the adoption of private-sector business practices had become embedded in both older and newer UK universities, albeit more intensely in the 'new'-university case. The ability of central-university managers to influence this process was highlighted, and it was contended that such persons rarely asserted 'fundamental academic values of professional autonomy, academic freedom, and democratic values' (p.476). Moreover, it was argued that these individuals provided little challenge to emerging, and often inappropriate, quantitative-heavy, performance frameworks. The researchers opined that such findings were worrying in terms of the future of universities and the likely experiences of those working within the sector.

Echoing comparable caveats in terms of wider reflections on public-service performance-management systems, Henman (2016) urged a more-thoughtful and reflective development and use of performance-management frameworks than is currently visible. Contrasting systems that have the potential to support 'authentic' performance improvements with frameworks that actively encourage 'misfiring', he highlighted several important paradoxes, contradictions and ironies. Making the case for a sensitive, culturally-appropriate and nuanced approach to performance management, the author argued that key actors in the process 'need to dance the delicate balance beam of performance measurement contradictions and tensions. This requires insight and nimbleness of mind' (p.606). Modell (2004) interpreted the rise of multi-dimensional performance schemes in terms of emerging and declining organisational myths (i.e., more or less institutionalised, or taken-for-granted, approaches). The argument was advanced that myths pivoting around the supremacy of goal-directed, multidimensional models are likely to replace the myth that public-service provision may be improved by heavy reliance on financial controls. However, he argued that the process of consensus-building relating to such systems had the potential to facilitate the misalignment of goals, performance indicators and organisational actions. In relation to the university sector, other related work highlighted the particular importance of power, politics and coalitions of interest in determining how university performance-management systems are shaped in respect of both cost allocations and representation (Modell, 2005 and 2006).

Focusing on a business-education context, Ferlie et al. (2010) argued for the development of a 'public-interest' school of management, encouraging the Business discipline to seek to serve

the wider public interest, rather than merely promote values consistent with 'business-friendly' notions of stakeholder/shareholder value. They argued that such a public-interest perspective might begin by focusing on how these units have succumbed to evaluating individual faculty performance using a pervasive control culture. Despite this apparently laudable call, however, existing management practices (as opposed to the rhetoric) operating in most universities seem far removed from the operational acceptance of such principles. After exploring the pervasive 'corporatisation' of business-focussed academic units, for instance, Huzzard et al. (2017) argued that such entities, in their own management practices, 'frequently contradict the normative implications of the knowledge claims that they themselves generate (as research) and disseminate (as teaching and outreach)' (p. 237).

From an individual perspective (which is the focus of this paper), it would seem reasonable to assume that employees, including those in universities, are likely to desire some degree of control over their own work. When this is denied or subverted by management systems and measures, resistance can be manifested in multiple forms, even if sometimes cloaked in the language of compliance (Collinson and Ackroyd, 2005). Unhelpful and inappropriate external influences on performance-management systems have the ability to distort individual performance-evaluation processes. For example, Decramer et al. (2012), exploring the Flemish academic setting, found that managerial ideas, emanating from outside the academic environment, infiltrated traditional university performance-management protocols and undermined more culturally-appropriate employee-evaluation processes. Internal performance and management-control systems developed by universities have been found to have the tendency to amplify the controls imposed by central authorities (often government) (Parker, 2012; Parker and Guthrie, 2012). While these internal controls may be accepted by some academics, they often cause a movement away from previously-held academic values (Parker, 2012; Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015; Grossi et al., 2019). When it comes to performance measures, moreover, universities operate in an uncertain environment. As a consequence, despite external demands for objective systems and rankings, such measures, in reality, tend to be enacted in subjective and relational ways, in light of output and impacts/outcomes frequently difficult to identify and often unclearly attributable (Broadbent and Laughlin, 2009; ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012; Tourish and Willmott, 2014). How performance-management systems are implemented and used inevitably affects individuals' behaviours (Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015). The way measurement practices are framed, understood and used within universities, therefore, represents an important area of investigation to shed light on and predict subsequent individual reactions and effects (Ozdil and Hoque, 2017; Grossi et al., 2019).

4. Theoretical background: framing performance management

How organisational actors interpret practices and, subsequently, decide their actions has been an important topic in the literature. A number of studies have explored how organisations use language and verbal accounts to manage a variety of issues (Lamertz and Baum, 1998; Arndt and Bigelow, 2000). A particularly prominent form of sense-giving in organisational accounts is framing. Framing can be viewed as akin to a collection of concepts, perspectives and mental filters relating to how actors organise, perceive and communicate about reality (Goffman, 1974; Snow and Benford, 1988). It is primarily concerned with highlighting certain aspects of an issue and giving them prominence (in order to elicit reactions) (Weaver, 2007). Frames can be used as mechanisms to affect change at times of uncertainty, contestation and instability ('t Hart, 1993), when several different (often competing) ways of reflecting on a situation are likely to clash. Understanding the mobilisation and legitimating capacity of frames is essential to explain the implementation of certain practices (for instance, the introduction and use of performance-management systems) and the individual responses to them (Snow and Benford, 2000).

Why organisations adopt particular practices, and how these are understood by their actors, has remained central also in accounting research (Liguori and Steccolini, 2012; Brivot et al., 2017).

While a number of organisations may decide to adopt certain accounting or performance-management systems, what differs across them is often the reactions individuals have, the processes they follow, and the results they achieve. Accounting studies have only occasionally investigated the way these practices and reactions are framed (Giorgi and Weber, 2015; Brivot et al., 2017), often limiting the analysis to accounting narratives and documents (Craig and Amernic, 2008). In auditing, Goffman's concept of framing (1974) has been used to explore the use of numbers (Vollmer, 2007), and Callon's (1998) similar notions of framing and overflowing have been employed in a range of studies (Carrington, 2007; Skærbæk and Tryggestad, 2010). Callon's (1998) ideas, however, mainly focus on external ties, often in relation to property rights, thus neglecting individual actors' roles. Similarly, previous research has mainly adopted an organisational focus, effectively disregarding the function individuals may play in actively framing issues and enacting subsequent behaviours. This less-investigated area is the focus of this study.

The concept of frame was initially introduced by Goffman as denoting a 'schemata of interpretation' (1974, p.21) that enables and regulates the way individuals give meaning to what goes on around them. According to Goffman (1974), meanings do not automatically attach themselves to objects, events or experiences, but are created through an actor's interpretive process. A primary natural frame, in particular, is a set of normative beliefs about the purpose of a certain system (e.g., a performance-management system). Different actors may perceive and interpret reality (or the same situation) differently, ranging from identifying it as unproblematic to highly problematic. Such interpretation may depend upon a person's primary framework or schemata of interpretation, which is used: 'to select some aspects of a perceived reality […], in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman, 1993, p.52). In Goffman's (1974) definition of primary natural fames, there is no evident wilful agency that intentionally interferes with one's interpretation of reality. Frames, however, can also be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed as individuals engage with one another in everyday interactions. Moreover, actors can strategically borrow frames from the external environment to inform their actions and, in so doing, reaffirm an interpretation of certain frames and meanings (Goffman, 1974; Gray et al., 2015). To explain these construction and deconstruction processes, sociology scholars also conceptualise a strategic approach to framing, as the way individuals use mental filters to promote and construct their own view of reality (Snow and Benford, 1988). Different from primary frames, this indicates an active phenomenon that involves agency and possibly contention at the level of reality construction (often connected to achieving a preferred, or advantageous, outcome). As actors' understanding is adjusted over time and by context, generating new interpretive frames to make sense of reality may not necessarily recreate frames that are consistent with existing ones; rather, interpretations that challenge them can be proposed (Snow and Benford, 2000).

How certain issues, such as performance management, are framed does not exist per se, but results from actors' endeavours to make sense of a situation (Snow and Benford, 2000). Organisational actors might interpret and frame the same situation differently because they apply different primary frameworks; alternatively, or in addition, actors may use frames strategically in order to influence the interpretation and framing of the situation in a more instrumental manner, to encourage a more personally-desired outcome or view (Himick and Brivot, 2018). Performance-management practices can be studied and understood as problems re-edited and framed by different actors (Young, 1994). This study, in particular, focuses on the use and elaboration of frames, rather than their generation and development over time (Snow and Benford, 2000).

4.1 Strategic and primary frames contrasted

Frames enable an individual to perceive, identify and label an infinite number of occurrences, giving meaning to reality and guiding action (Goffman, 1974). According to Snow and Benford (1988), strategic responses to certain events and practices draw on specific strategic social frames

that have three core tasks, as they: (a) define the 'problems' and identify what has caused them (diagnostic framing); (b) suggest ways to ameliorate the situation via potential lines of action (prognostic framing); and (c) motivate action, providing a 'call to arms' for certain groups of actors (action mobilisation). It is possible (or even likely) that actors, while agreeing on the diagnosis, may nevertheless substantially differ with regard to possible solutions or lines of action.

Organisational actors are immersed in rich discursive contexts characterised by a multiplicity of frames. When interacting with one another, actors socially construct rationales and justifications for their own behaviours. This 'construction' of justifications is linguistically mirrored in the above third core task of strategic framing, which draw upon 'vocabularies of motive' and action (Scott and Lyman 1968; Snow and Benford, 2000). Such frames and vocabularies provide individuals with reasons for identifying with certain goals and values. Snow and Benford (2000) proposed that the construction of vocabularies to motivate action is based on claims regarding: (i) the severity of the problem identified, (ii) its urgency (e.g., danger or need for immediate action), (iii) the efficacy that taking action will entail, and/or (iv) the propriety associated with action itself (and related sense of responsibility embedded in the actors, which should lead them to act).

While the choice of specific frames may be strategic, shaped by a number of interest-related factors, it is important to remember that aspects of one's primary frames (which are often more culturally and value-aligned), frequently relating to an actor's background and experiences, as well as his/her position and salience in a field, can also encourage to assume particular frames/vocabularies and discourage from using others (Meyer and Höllerer, 2010). Primary frames create behavioural norms and expectations that can perpetuate the re-enactment of earlier frames, even without strategic or conscious decisions. In the interaction between primary and strategic frames, however, slippage and misfiring are possible, where actors may deviate, either intentionally or unwittingly, from the initial frames they understood or intended to follow (Snow and Benford, 1988). Frames and meanings are continually transformed and reinterpreted, causing readjustments at both the organisational and individual levels. A hint to the possible interaction between primary and strategic frames can be found in the concept of resonance, defined by previous literature as the extent to which framing can strike a responsive chord or ring true with actors' extant beliefs (Snow and Benford, 1988; Vasi and Strang, 2009; Giorgi and Weber, 2015). However, this concept has been mainly adopted to explore the role of frames during contestation (Brivot et al., 2017) and has been mostly defined in relation to actors' values, without explaining what the relationship between primary and strategic frames might actually be.

5. Methodology

This study is based on interpretive comparative case studies (Patton, 2014) of four UK universities selected following criterion sampling, namely two older (viewed as more research-intensive, Grove, 2022), universities, and two more-recently established (viewed as relatively less research-intensive), post-1992, universities. Previous literature highlighted that, although all universities have been highly influenced by managerial reforms at different stages, differences in the introduction of managerial practices within these two types of university exist in terms of their focusing on accounting and performance numbers (especially pronounced in post-1992 universities) and the mix of managerial vs. academic values (Du and Lapsley, 2019).

All four universities are based in England, three in the South and one in the North West of the country. The two older universities are both part of the UK Russell Group[5] and welcome more than 20,000 students every year; the new universities (both in the Southern area) are of different sizes, one hosting over 20,000 students per year and the other over 8,000. Within each university, academics belonging to different subject disciplines were selected for analysis, namely Business (e.g., accounting, management, etc.) and Natural Sciences (e.g., medical sciences, biology, chemistry, etc.). These were identified on the basis of criterion sampling (Patton, 2014), anticipating possible different attitudes and abilities towards measuring performance, depending on the actors' knowledge of issues relating to the development and use of performance-

management systems; such knowledge and understanding expected to be higher in Business subjects.[6]

Twenty-eight interviews (seven in each selected university) with key academic actors involved in the design, implementation and operation of university performance-management systems were conducted. Official documents (e.g., higher-education policy documents, and central guidelines regarding teaching and research) were also used as background information to triangulate some of the interviewees' responses. The interviewees included senior academics and academics in managerial roles in the four universities. These were identified to represent not only the views of those upon whom control is externally exerted (e.g., pro-vice-chancellors (Pro-VCs) and deans), but also those who are directly responsible for the provision of higher-education services (e.g., heads of school and senior academics). A snowball sampling approach was adopted to identify interviewees who, in each university, included: at least one person charged with strategic leadership (e.g., Pro-VCs and deans), two heads of school (one in the Business discipline and one in Natural Sciences), and two senior academics for each of the two disciplines. While snowball sampling allowed collecting primary data in a cost-effective way and ensured the identification of those directly involved in the use and implementation of performance-management systems, this technique could also reproduce biases due to the possible selection of people with similar views, anchoring the subsequently identified sample to the same characteristics of the initial group. In order to address these possible risks and limitations, in the snowballing process, gatekeepers and interviewees were asked to indicate colleagues who shared different views about the systems, so as to generate variation (and increase representativeness) in the responses. Moreover, some of the interviewees were triangulated and directly identified by the researchers on the basis of the information on their roles and responsibilities available from the university webpages. An attempt was made to identify interviewees with comparable experience and seniority/roles.

Drawing on the theoretical concepts discussed earlier, the interviews aimed at reconstructing individual framing mechanisms in relation to performance-management practices within universities. In order to allow comparability across interviews, a semi-structured interview guide was developed and slightly adjusted to take into consideration the interviewee's role/position. This contained open episodic questions, which allowed the interviewees to speak freely, in order to tease out indirectly the framing tasks being utilised to make sense of the different performance-management practices. Questions were asked to identify, with reference to both teaching and research activities, the most relevant (in the interviewees' perspective and with regards to their everyday work experience) practices relating to performance-management systems in use in the UK higher-education sector, and the changes that took place over time. For each major practice they identified, the interviewees were asked (among other things) to discuss their perceptions of the source and rationale for the change, outline perceived advantages and disadvantages and talk about their experiences and reactions to it. Possible inconsistencies across different experiences were explored by the researchers. Examples and explanations of the effects of these practices upon university activities, and, in particular, research and teaching delivery, were also sought. As an example, the interview guide used in relation to senior academics is shown in the Appendix.

The interviews were transcribed in full, and their coding was carried out with the support of the software Atlas.ti. The unit of analysis considered for coding purposes was any argument where the reference to a specific practice or aspect of performance management, in either teaching or research (with an open code 'other' also allowed), was made together with at least one core strategic framing task (diagnostic, prognostic or motivation). A performance-management issue could be identified by the interviewees in terms of either the presence or absence of something. It should be noted that a number of different strategic framing tasks co-existed, and were coded, within the same argument.

Snow and Benford (2000) suggest that a better understanding of frames resides in studying their articulation processes. To this end, the methodology adopted in this study innovatively included elements of both framing and linguistic/cognitive text analyses. Linguistic and cognitive

text analysis is particularly suitable in the study of viewpoints across different individuals, as it considers not only the role of the narrator/speaker, but also the space they talk into and the content of discussion (Dancygier, 2017). This stresses the symbolic meaning and value attributed by the interviewees to specific areas and aspects discussed, as well as relationships and patterns across them. Drawing on linguistic and cognitive text analysis, the study considered the lexicon used, as well as possible references to the time passing and whether ideas and concepts reported seemed to be socially or culturally accepted/understood (rather than considered only as technical speech, Boas, 2017). For instance, the interviewees identified themselves with the performance-management systems and activities set in place to varying extents, showing different levels of ownership of the related metrics and values behind them. Moreover, to investigate the level of acceptance that individuals showed towards a particular aspect of reality, a cognitive interpretive approach to language suggests consideration of the frequency of occurrence/co-occurrence of certain terms and ideas/concepts (Gries, 2017).

Integrating aspects of linguistics with previous framing literature enriched the empirical analysis and allowed the identification of a number of different elements and categories to be considered during the interview coding process. Drawing on previous literature (Snow and Benford, 2000; Gray et al., 2015), specific features of different actors' framing were coded considering: positive (emphasis on rewards and positive behaviours) vs negative (based on penalties connected to discouraging negative behaviours) framing; and scope of framing, where references were made to the interests of a specific group (exclusive) vs references to wider groups of stakeholders (inclusive). During the interviews, a dichotomy of 'me/us' versus 'others' (and thus a sense of inclusion or exclusion) often emerged.

Primary natural frames (mirroring an actor's primary truths or biases, central beliefs and culture, used to understand reality; Goffman, 1974) were operationalised in terms of patterns and structures presented in an individual's thinking. Here, indeed, context and experiences, as well as actors' beliefs of what reality is and the right way of doing things, are expressed (Schroeder, 2002). These may relate, for instance, to one's sense of responsibility towards a certain issue/event, or standards of performance they personally set and expect from themselves and others. In the context of this paper, this includes beliefs of what universities represent in society and what role performance management should have within them, as well as what role/relevance each academic discipline holds.

Framing literature identifies a number of core strategic social-framing tasks as ways to diagnose a problem, identify a solution and propose a reason for action (Snow and Benford, 2000). Such tasks implicitly already contain elements of linguistic and cognitive text analysis, as they focus on how concepts/vocabularies are used and practices/tools are understood (Dancygier, 2017). For coding purposes (following Snow and Benford, 1988 and 2000): (i) diagnostic framing was operationalised in terms of the identification of a problem/issue in relation to research and teaching activities; (ii) prognostic framing was operationalised via the proposal of solutions and strategies to answer an issue previously identified; and (iii) motivational framing was coded when an interviewee suggested justifications or reasons to act/not act (why/how) related to severity (when the problem was identified as important and substantial), urgency (when action and solutions were indicated as urgent and timely), efficacy (when action/inaction was seen as instrumental to reach certain positive aims), and propriety (when action/inaction was justified because of what was appropriate, professional or ethical). An example of an argument containing diagnostic framing (the identification of bad/low performance and the assessment that different academic disciplines require different approaches), together with prognostic (suggesting a different use of metric systems to improve the situation) and motivational framing based on efficacy reasons (what is beneficial to achieve a better result) was:

> *"The research output as a chemist just doesn't work in other disciplines; certainly not in engineering and mathematics. It's counter-productive beyond belief. In the Maths department they had submitted more papers*

than the rest of the UK, but the quality of them was way down. So I said: 'If you submitted fewer maybe the quality would go up'. Disciplines are hugely different. It's chalk and chees: one could have 10,000 papers, each of which has 400,000 authors on it!" (Senior academic 1, Natural Sciences, older university 1)

Finally, to provide a more complete picture, as suggested by linguistic and cognitive text analysis (Boas, 2017), the potential emotional impact of performance-management practices was also considered by adding to the coding scheme both emotional diagnostic frames (where assessments of personal and emotional attachment were made in relation to a certain accepted or undesirable situation) and emotional motivational frames (where action/inaction was justified on the basis of personal commitment and preferences). An example of the latter was:

"I think we know we can make a contribution, that is how I would view it and what motivates me to work. You know you are making a contribution to society with what you do, we need teachers, we need these people. They will never earn enough to pay them back for all they give to their students." (Pro-VC, post-1992 university 1)

6. Findings: university actors' framing

During the interviews, responses and feedback provided on the use of performance-management systems, metrics and comparative ranking lists, for both research and teaching, were generally positive. Tools used, such as module evaluations and student surveys, were, however, mostly perceived as being pushed top-down (from the centre of the university or even from government), with little ownership and control by academic staff. Nevertheless, the interviewees showed a shared common understanding of the performance-management systems in place, using specific vocabularies when talking about them. For instance, when teaching and research performances were mentioned during the interviews, respondents tended to refer to TEF and REF as heavily influencing most of the measurement and management tools and techniques in place in their disciplines, and affecting how staff were 'steered' towards achieving appropriate behaviours. As a consequence, from a linguistic point of view, the framing showed a neat identification of different structures. While research and teaching were not the only activities academics referred to, they were viewed as two important, precise and distinct systems of reference when reflecting on the measurement and management of the quality and quantity of their own work. With reference to the general frames and vocabularies, it is also interesting to note that exclusive language and frames, stressing differences, division and situations of separation (for instance, making reference to the membership in the Russell Group or clearly singling out 'good/bad' performers), were more often used when talking about research (rather than teaching) activities. This suggests that the REF, and related rankings and performance systems, have, over time, created a very competitive environment, possibly at the expense of collegiality. This picture is confirmed by the fact that inclusive language, used to describe people and cases as similar or grouped together, was more commonly used with reference to teaching. A typical answer in relation to the use of vocabularies of exclusion and research activities was:

"Well, there are people in two camps. There are people who are doing high-quality research and they are grateful for it to be ranked because they come out on top of everyone, and that's fantastic. You then get others who are maybe just starting on research, or they may be into pedagogical research. But those journals are ranked by the ABS [Association of Business Schools – at intervals, it produces a much-used journal ranking list] *as a 2."* (Senior academic 1, Business, post-1992 university 1)

Table 2 shows frequencies and contents of the main diagnostic frames (reflecting on an aspect of the systems, or referencing a possible problem) that were used by the interviewees in the two disciplines (and in total) to discuss the performance-management systems adopted by their

universities for teaching and research. When analysing the data, it became apparent that, different from what was suggested in previous literature, diagnostic framing was not necessarily used to identify a problem, but often merely and simply to assess and evaluate an existing accepted situation. In light of this, two different types of emerging diagnostic frames were identified in this research: negative diagnostic frames, identifying features of performance management seen as unhelpful or damaging by the interviewees (such as, the possibility of unfair gaming when using the tools, or the assessment of such systems as not being effective in achieving their goals); and reflective diagnostic frames, suggesting neutral or positive features of the systems (for instance, in relation to the way they can be used, the importance of resources to run them, or the use of business-like managerial approaches, which, for some, were seen as positive).

Table 2

In both Business and Natural Science disciplines, the interviewees mostly commented on the type of metrics (in 16.5% of all arguments for Business; 14.4% for Natural Sciences, Table 2) and the use of ranking lists (10.7% of times for Business; 8.8% for Natural Sciences). In fewer cases, the resources (financial and human) needed to establish and maintain such systems were highlighted as being critical (4.1% for Business; 5.2% for Natural Sciences). This was frequently done by stressing limitations on resources but, most often, the focus was on the importance of students' fees and research funding for the continuation of key teaching and research activities. The possibility of (unfairly) gaming performance-management systems was seen as a problem (3.2% and 3.6% of times in Business and Natural Sciences, respectively). Common examples of gaming behaviours were, with respect to teaching: the possible inflation of marks through relatively-easier assessments to gain favour with students; the 'dumbing down' of syllabus content to reduce students' difficulties; and the choice of having the best lecturers teach at strategic times of the year. As far as research was concerned, gaming was mainly identified through: the use of multiple authors on papers, where not everyone may have contributed to the work equally; the strategic timing of paper submissions; and the exploitation of published papers with the movement of academics across universities at the end of a REF period. Finally, managerial vocabularies and frames (embedded in 3.9% of all arguments, Table 2) were particularly used by Business interviewees and, perhaps unsurprisingly, among top-management actors located in either discipline. For instance:

> "*I am comfortable* [with the use of metrics and rankings]. *Whether my colleagues are is another story. Some colleagues, I think they just perceive themselves as self-employed, I think they don't really feel part of the university at all. They just go and do their own things. We sell ourselves as a public university, but we have to generate income, cash. We have to invest in estates. Basically, business decisions that enable the business, in inverted commas, as a university, to continue.*" (Pro-VC, post-1992 university 1)

The most interesting finding relates to the differences in the features of the strategic framing tasks used by the interviewees, which were not so much related to the type of university (old vs. post-1992), but rather to the discipline (Business vs Natural Sciences). Looking across the three main strategic framing tasks (diagnostic, prognostic and motivational), Business-discipline interviewees tended to make relatively more use of diagnostic (rather than prognostic or motivational) framing, even simply to identify or discuss an issue. This contrasted with Natural Science interviewees, where relatively more prognostic framing was used; here, solutions to identified problems were more frequently proposed. This suggests a greater acceptance of the extant performance-management tools by those in Business disciplines.

Natural Science academics were more critical and showed greater flexibility in the crafting and interpretation of performance-management concepts and systems, compared to their Business-discipline counterparts. The former were much more likely to point out that any

obsession with statistics and excessive use of metrics to support decision making had to be avoided; these tools had to be used as a support, rather than as a basis for the establishment of questionable numerical targets. For instance:

> *"I was talking to this colleague in Oxford and Cambridge: they don't do this endless review of their own papers. They'll have to check that they can actually fill the forms in, but they won't constantly assess their own papers… I think that's something that the other institutions miss. I seriously think that a pig doesn't get fatter depending on the number of times you weigh it. Seriously, we think if we constantly weigh the pig, the pig will get bigger, and this is just not true, and is not constantly improving anything. It's counterproductive because of the cost!"* (Senior academic 1, Natural Sciences, older university 1)

> *"If I engage with some of these metrics, it helps me understand better ways to get my piece of work in the right places. In that sense, it's very positive and the intention is appropriate. But if it then becomes 'in order for you to get a promotion, I need to have 1,000 citations', that's a very sinister use of these metrics!"* (Dean, Natural Sciences, post-1992 university 1)

Staff in Business disciplines, at all levels, tended to be more wedded to accepting the rationale, meaning and tools of performance management. Here, there was a greater inclination to identify with 'objective' targets and related 'appropriate' actions. Their framing was more assertive and based on perceived cause-effect relationships among metrics. Contrary to what one might have expected, references to existing relevant business/organisational literature and practice, showing the limits of all-embracing measurement and management systems, were rarely made. They seemed to accept managerial ideas and tools that underpinned university performance-management systems much more decisively than their Natural Science colleagues:

> *"The university's central control has literally taken over the NSS* [National Student Survey[7]] … *Because I am cynical, I just designed the whole* [teaching] *assessment system around the NSS questions, because… why wouldn't you?"* (Head of Business School, post-1992 university 1)

> *"For each staff member, if we score out of 5 maximum, we expect everybody to achieve 4 and above* [in the teaching evaluations]. *So anything less than 4, even if its 3.5 3.6, is not a good score; they take you to discuss your probationary targets or your appraisal so that next year you get 4.2/4.3, something like that. It is an essential part of your performance indicator"* (Senior academic 1, Business, older university 1)

While the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, or similar streams of thought, was sometimes referenced by these interviewees, they still largely proposed an embracing of systems that privileged the use of precise metrics. This highlighted an underlying contradiction that especially seemed to characterise the Business disciplines. Despite a general agreement on the difficulty of evaluating research objectively, a wide range of examples was provided of how and why such measures should still be used. Although this might have been done unconsciously, during the interviews strategic framing tasks were often utilised in contradictory ways, ultimately endorsing objective measures and standards. For instance:

> "*We believe in the San Francisco Declaration; it is our formal policy. But then we come up against the operational issues about how you promote people where you are not familiar with the journals and you are not familiar with the quality of the work. So you do use the ABS list as a shortcut. I think everybody agrees the policy is not the right one, that you should not judge papers on the basis of the journal. But the problem is we have to evaluate our performance.*" (Head of Business School, older university 1)

The same individual frequently referenced managerial, business-like vocabularies and diagnostic frames, stressing the usefulness and objectivity of the metrics in use:

> *"When you appoint them on probation* [referring to early-career academics]*, they have very clear objectives. If they don't achieve them, they will not be appointed in post. Which does happen. Over a 3 or 4-year probation, we expect them to have accepted or published two pieces of quality work, which would be 3 or 4-star quality, and then we would be looking for teaching which is largely along the scores of 4 and 5."* (Head of Business School, older university 1)

Similar contradictory patterns were often visible among the Business-discipline responses, regardless of the interviewee's role and position. For instance:

> "*One of the biggest changes has been quantifying student feedback. I will get reported if there is any traffic light report and I'm amber* [referring to the use of a traffic light system connected to the measurement and management of teaching performance against quantified targets – green is indicative of acceptable performance, amber of some concern and red indicates a problem]. *For three years I got asked 'Why are you getting less than 3.7 points? Why are you below excellent?' You've got this bureaucracy again coming into the system; it's simpler for the administrators to deal with numbers and analyse them, but it doesn't necessarily reflect what you are doing. I think that's the other change, a lot of the management of teaching has moved towards people who quite probably don't teach and don't talk to the people teaching.*" (Senior academic 2, Business, post-1992 university 2)

Table 3 summarises the frequency of the main motivational frames that emerged, by discipline and in total. These could indicate positive motivational framing, stressing reasons for action/inaction (e.g., something that is/should be done so to be efficient or because it is proper); or negative motivational framing, highlighting the lack or inappropriateness of something as a justification for action/inaction (e.g., little efficiency or propriety of the systems).

Table 3

Also in the case of motivational frames, the Natural Sciences appeared more critical overall, highlighting a bigger use of propriety/negative arguments. They saw performance measures and rankings, for both teaching and research, as needing much more contextual interpretation compared to their Business colleagues. Efficacy reasons and instrumental behaviours to motivate action and explain the use of performance management were present in both groups of disciplines, albeit with different nuances. The Business interviewees, in particular, often highlighted instrumental concerns about the effects of student numbers and the severe financial impact on their everyday activities if targets were not met. For instance:

> "*The focus* [of REF] was *on quality. Your four best pieces; or what you think are your four best pieces. Now I think that was a good development at the time because what it did was – think of a ladder metaphor - everyone was somewhere on the ladder and it would stretch people to go the next rung up or the next two rungs. People who'd been publishing nothing were suddenly writing. If you followed the system, the net effect at that time was a better volume and quality of research.*" (Dean, Business, older university 1)

> *"Universities are really reliant on student numbers. […] So we need to think about the students or their parents, take notice of these metrics before taking a decision"* (Head of Business School, post-1992 university 1)

In contrast, staff in Natural Sciences often indicated that they were willing to use TEF and REF systems, and related metrics, but only when these could be attributed a useful function. They

highlighted the need for a sense of propriety (in addition to efficacy) and stressed that those using such systems for evaluation and management purposes should have a 'feel' for the context and an understanding of what the systems are actually trying to achieve. For instance:

> *"Yes, you hear me talking about the REF a lot lot lot. That does not mean I think the REF is the most important thing. It provides a helpful framework for discussions, doing things successfully. The REF represents a good chance to gain a more rounded approach to research. […] You can channel feedback…"* (Dean, Natural Sciences, post-1992 university 1)

> "*It would be naïve to say to go ahead with education without something like the NSS, which is getting a view from the students and a view that's obviously taken into consideration. I think it has started to make us ask different questions about what we are doing, but the downsides of it are… in any sort of questionnaire like that, there is a danger that we then try and teach in the way that we think the students want. But this isn't necessarily the best way. One has to be careful*" (Senior academic 1, Natural Sciences, older university 2)

Interestingly, the higher the interviewees were in the organisational hierarchy, the more they tended to use efficacy-based arguments relating to performance-management systems as a justification for their decisions. This would suggest that people in positions of formal authority are more inclined to justify their actions in instrumental ways, perhaps as a basis to gain legitimation. Academics, in both discipline areas, closer to the 'coal face' were able to identify more potential (or actual) negative consequences of the (often relatively-recently introduced or tweaked) performance-management frameworks. In this regard, Table 4 shows the frequency of the main prognostic frames used, by discipline and in total. Prognostic frames were identified when a possible solution was proposed to a certain problem, issue, or existing situation previously highlighted by the interviewees.

Table 4

As indicated in Table 4, the content of some of the prognostic frames re-proposed the same contradictions that had emerged as regards diagnostic frames. While concerns were raised in relation to the use of metrics, many interviewees still appeared wedded to metric-based tools and systems. Rather than making suggestions related to abandoning, or radically changing, them, a frequently-proposed solution was to strengthen their use, possibly through the introduction/addition of new and/or different metrics. Overall, 10.9% of the coded arguments contained at least one prognostic frame focusing on the use of metrics (Table 4). Within the Business disciplines, prognostic frames were often based on suggestions relating to a different use of existing metrics or the introduction of new ones. At times, this was mentioned in combination with the need for more comprehensive and better judgement when using such metrics (mentioned 7.5% of the relevant coded arguments by Business interviewees, Table 4). The Natural Science interviewees also referred to solutions and improvements based on a different use of current metrics or the introduction of different metrics, but particularly emphasised the need to focus on quality (9.5% of mentions) and effectiveness/transparency (8.2%), for both metrics/systems and expected targets in teaching and research. Both groups of disciplines referred to solutions that they perceived would improve the delivery/production of teaching and research, as well as reducing unhelpful gaming strategies. For instance, highlighting the necessity to steer students' expectations better in order to achieve better evaluations and effectiveness, while also proposing solutions to possible gaming behaviours:

> "*We've moved away from a paper-based system* [of teaching evaluation] *to an online system. There are weaknesses with that* [the online questionnaire] *because not every student will fill it in, whereas if you*

give it in the classroom, they tend to. Having it online, you get more of the real data, shall we say. I'm not trying to say that people deliberately manipulate the system, but there's a danger [of manipulation] *if you have a paper-based system.*" (Senior academic 1, Business, post-1992 university 1)

7. Discussion: the interaction between strategic and primary frames

The majority of the performance-management systems discussed in this study were initially introduced by universities in response to government pressures to be more accountable in terms of teaching and research outputs/impacts. This was frequently justified in relation to funding made available, either by government or directly by students. In some cases, such as REF, these systems are directly linked to mechanisms likely to result in the redistribution of resources, thus acquiring particular importance for universities. Many of these models echo ideas connected to the theory of normative behaviour in science (Thelwall and Delgado, 2015), where outputs are clearly measurable, and for every action there is a corresponding definitive (predictable) reaction. Following this approach, which is consistent with accepted managerial reforms based on long-standing rational-management ideas (Argenti, 1980), such measures were initially (and predominantly) applied to Natural Science settings (e.g., putting emphasis on grant income and the management of relatively visible aspects of outputs, such as patents). However, over time, similar ideas have been extended to all disciplines and areas within universities in many jurisdictions (Parker and Guthrie, 2012; Grossi et al., 2019), and have been embedded as a key aspect of the UK REF system since its inception (Glass et al., 1996).

Despite their relatively earlier adoption of such tools and ideas, the findings provide evidence that the Natural Science interviewees managed to develop and retain a certain level of wariness towards performance-management systems, clearly visible in the strategic frames used to evaluate them. In contrast, Business-discipline interviewees demonstrated much greater acceptance of performance-management vocabularies and perceived such notions as less problematic. The initial expectation, however, was for Business disciplines to be potentially more critical towards the introduction of rigid and (seemingly) objective metric-based systems as the basis for control and management. This was founded on the idea that Business academics would be more likely aware of the limits of these systems, with much research and critical reflection on their negative impacts being present in their literature over many years (Sharifi and Bovaird, 1995; Muller, 2018). How can such a paradox be explained?

While the findings presented in the previous section mainly focussed on the use and content of strategic (diagnostic, prognostic and motivational) frames, the (possibly paramount) importance of actors' primary frames should not be downplayed. These, indeed, mirror actors' previous experience, background and normative, more-or-less conscious, rules (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993). Such primary frames can contribute to explain the different and counterintuitive patterns that were highlighted in both the Business and Natural Science disciplines.

The performance-management systems externally pushed from government were framed through the use of managerial, business-like, language (see Section 2). Given this, the Business-discipline interviewees appeared more attuned to vocabularies and arguments that already permeated their primary framing schemes and underpinned frameworks such as REF and TEF. These individuals were used to viewing the university, like any other organisation, as a business; and they were used to comparing different parts of 'the business' on the basis of numerical frameworks, utilising scores and rankings. Previous education and professional backgrounds may have further strengthened Business academics' unconscious biases, making them more accepting of managerial values embedded in the need for quantitatively-focused management frameworks. This may suggest an interpretation of performance-management systems as tools sustained by already-accepted language, reflecting key (and strong) normative beliefs. Primary frames can make such tools more acceptable and reasonable, resulting in Business academics buying into these ideas more easily, despite the existence of research from their own field suggesting that such systems have great shortcomings, often do not work according to plans and can have major dysfunctional

consequences (Muller, 2018). This contributes to explain previous findings (see Wilsdon et al., 2015; Huzzard et al., 2017) highlighting an overreliance on, and overproduction of, metrics, particularly in the Business disciplines.

Natural Science academics drew on a different set of prevailing primary frames. Because of their educational background and professional experience, their primary frames were less likely to be aligned with specific rigid, managerial performance-management practices. These actors' strategic frames and responses appeared more differentiated and critical. As highlighted earlier, their answers suggested a greater focus on 'old' academic and scientific values, where the emphasis was on science and teaching, rather than on managerial abilities and targets. Different (non-business-driven) primary frames allowed individuals in Natural Sciences to reinterpret and reframe the performance-management systems and metrics that had been forced (often from above) onto them, frequently minimising some of the potential drawbacks through a particular call to reason, fairness and personal responsibility (propriety) of staff. This resulted in the emergence of much more flexible vocabularies and behaviours. Good judgement was often invoked by Natural Science interviewees to highlight that performance measures and targets, for both research and teaching, had to be developed and interpreted holistically, case by case. This approach seemed to be much weaker in the day-to-day frames and examples provided by Business-discipline interviewees, who showed contradictions between articulated rhetoric (what should be done) and reality (what was done).

The potential misalignment between actors' primary frames and university performance-management practices (and relative strategic frames to explain their use) was resolved by the domineering and steering influence of the former (primary frames) across the four universities. Paradoxically, the alignment across primary frames, strategic frames and proposed performance-management practices created contradictions in the Business interviewees' sense-giving processes that were not visible elsewhere. These can be explained as stemming from inconsistencies between more-or-less conscious primary frames, which encourage the idea that quantitative-management frameworks are 'good', and awareness, due to actual evidence and academic knowledge, that these practices themselves can be flawed and frequently do not work as intended. The study, nevertheless, highlights an important influence of primary over strategic frames in both Natural Science and Business disciplines. It also suggests that performance-management systems presented in ways that are consistent with actors' primary frames tend to be much more accepted, regardless of the organisational actors' roles and positions.

8. Conclusions and contribution of the study

The research suggests that the pre-existing ownership of certain vocabularies and the consistency between primary frames and performance-management practices play an important role in defining actors' understanding and reactions to these practices. If performance-management systems are framed in a way that aligns with their established beliefs and values (primary frames), actors will more likely accept them. Conversely, if aspects of performance-management systems clash with primary frames, actors will seek to adjust, or re-interpret, the practice to make it consistent with such frames. Primary frames, therefore, influence and define the subsequent interpretation of a practice and, as a consequence, the patterns of strategic frames that will be adopted to make sense of, justify and, eventually, implement it.

The theoretical contribution of this paper is twofold. First, speaking into previous framing literature, it provides evidence of the important effect of primary frames over strategic frames. If a certain practice, such as performance management, is framed consistently with organisational actors' primary frames, strategic frames and reactions will likely also be aligned. In this case, individuals may accept and buy into a certain practice, possibly even disregarding actual evidence and previous knowledge in the area. The ownership of certain vocabularies, therefore, contributes to define organisational actors' responses and the strategic-framing actually used. This also refines the limited previous literature on framing resonance (Vasi and Strang, 2009; Giorgi and Weber,

2015), showing how strategic and primary frames can interact to influence actors' reactions to different practices. Previous studies suggest that an optimal balance of vocabularies and frames is difficult to achieve (Snow and Benford, 2000). This is what seems to have characterised the Business interviewees part of this study. In the presence of a highly-uniform managerial (mostly metrics-driven) vocabulary and an aligned set of well-established, business-like primary frames, strategic framing tasks, such as diagnostic and motivational frames, become much less powerful and active.

Second, by looking at universities, the paper contributes to the stream of literature that aims to explain different individual responses to the introduction and use of similar management tools and systems. In particular, the evidence presented here adds to recent university studies (Huzzard et al., 2017; Du and Lapsley, 2019; Guarini et al., 2020), proposing that individual reactions vary not so much depending on culture and nature of a university, but rather on the discipline/area considered within it; such reactions being strongly and primarily affected by individuals' primary frames. Being socialised into consistent primary frames may be counterproductive if a practice aims to stimulate robust debate and innovation, as practices aligned with actors' primary frames are less likely to be challenged. Previous literature (Ferlie et al., 2010; Thomas and Wilson, 2011), moreover, has highlighted the search for increased academic and scientific legitimacy of Business disciplines, especially when compared to Natural Sciences, to address a possible divide between academic rigour and practical relevance in such subjects. The findings indicate that this process, when combined with government emphasis on business-related modes of operation, may actually encourage Business academics to retreat towards the same practice-orientated mechanisms and ideas they were so keen to abandon. The study provides evidence of how the primary frames in-built within academic actors can lead them to rely on performance-management tools they are more familiar and comfortable with, paradoxically reproducing old, more practice-based rather than academic-based, schemes and behaviours. Such a paradox may be explained by the prevalence of primary over strategic frames at the individual level.

As in many studies, the research design and capacity of researchers regarding data collection provide limitations and restrictions in the generalisation of the findings of this research. While the selection of two relatively research-intensive, older, universities, and two more-recently established universities, as well as the focus on two specific subject disciplines (Business and Natural Sciences), provides interesting comparative cases, expanding the research beyond four universities and two disciplines would provide a richer basis for making bolder claims with wider application. Indeed, the exploration of such issues in other countries with different academic landscapes (and with different political and regulatory forces at work) would facilitate a more fine-grained appreciation of the impact of the rise of performance management in university settings. Future studies could also explore strategic-framing tasks in different practices and disciplines. While it was beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the influence of specific financial aspects on organisational actors' framing, future research could consider whether departmental accreditations and financial autonomy, which are particularly prevalent in Business disciplines[8], play a role in affecting academic actors' frames. Such aspects may put additional emphasis on business-like ideas (including generation of 'profit', or, more correctly 'surplus') to the detriment of wider educational and social goals that have, for so long, been the traditional focus of universities. In particular, the extent to which accreditation in Business disciplines aligns with the use of specific framing tendencies is an area where further investigation could inform considerations regarding strategy within universities, as well as being useful in national policy-development deliberations. Finally, studies are needed to include other actors (such as unions and government) who may play a role in the framing process.

The study has important practice implications. While framing a new practice consistently with existing or prevailing primary frames may be a winning strategy in the short term (for instance, to speed up the embedding of change), in the long term, those tasked with introducing new

practices (including performance-management systems) should be aware that the prevalence of a certain view of the world has the potential to hamper organisational innovation and learning. In this respect, and to tackle these potential dangers, the study suggests that increased communication and discussion among different disciplines would be helpful. This could underpin the furthering of the mission focus of a university and help with cross-dissemination of ideas and vocabularies more appropriate to advancing the not-for-profit, social goals that are (or should be) central to what universities are about.

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Notes

[1] A post-1992 UK university (also referred to as a new university) is a former polytechnic (or similar institution) that was given university status through the UK Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. These universities can be contrasted to the normally longer-established, traditional (pre-1992) UK universities.

[2] This became the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy in 2016.

[3] A REF impact case study is a short narrative which describes how research has had an effect beyond academia. The impact must be related to its underpinning research and the case study can feature a diversity of evidence (quantitative, qualitative, tangible and material). For more detail, see REF2021 homepage: https://www.ref.ac.uk/.

[4] The San Francisco Declaration on research assessment discourages the practice of correlating a journal ranking (or impact factor) to the quality of a published piece of research. It suggests such metrics should not be used to measure the quality of research articles or in hiring, promotion, or funding decisions. The declaration originated from the December 2012 meeting of the American Society for Cell Biology; it was published in May 2013.

[5] The Russell Group is an association of twenty-four universities in the UK. It was established in 1994 to foster the group's political and developmental agenda. Russell Group members (which account for 15% of UK higher-education institutions) received over 75% of the research and contract income of the sector in 2017-18 (Russell Group, 2018).

[6] Given the research method utilised (and the consequent labour intensity involved in such an approach), the focus of the study was restricted to these two disciplines. Business disciplines are relatively more-recently established within universities, and traditional research and teaching tenets may be less entrenched here. However, awareness of the language of performance management, and the dangers of rigid approaches to such a process, would be expected to be more fully understood (the issue of performance management emerging in a range of areas in both Business research and practice). By contrast, teaching and research in Natural Sciences are more long-standing and are likely to have more established norms and beliefs, while, knowledge of managerial and performance-management tools, and related issues, would be expected to be lower for individuals in this area. These considerations formed the bases for criterion sampling.

[7] The NSS is an annual survey of all final-year undergraduate-degree students at UK higher-education institutions. It was first launched in 2005 and seeks students' opinions of the quality of their degree programmes. At present, it is based on 27 different statements, to which students are asked to respond to in a closed-response manner (scale 5 to 1, with 5= 'definitely agree'). Following this, a broad open-response question is asked to elicit positive and negative aspects of the student experience. (National Student Survey, 2020).

[8] National and international accreditation processes (and badges) are frequently viewed as important signals that impact on the reputation of university Business programmes and their reception in the market. However, whether such symbols serve the university sector, and society, well, remains a moot point (Zhao and Ferran, 2016; Paulsson, 2017; Rhodes, 2022). For UK universities, three important accreditation schemes are: the US-based Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS), and the London-based Association of MBAs (AMBA). These schemes use academic-performance metrics, as part of a wider package of data, to influence accreditation decisions, with each encouraging devolved financial systems for the Business discipline. This may further incentivise these units to embrace the language of performance management and develop particular perspectives on revenue generation and 'financialisation' of their programmes. It should be noted that, among the Business-discipline units included in this paper, three had at least one of these accreditations, with one of these being triple accredited.

Tables

Table 1 – Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) metrics used

Metric/Aspect	Information Source
Teaching	National Student Survey
Assessment and feedback	National Student Survey
Academic support	National Student Survey
Non-continuation	Higher Education Statistics Agency and Individualised Learner Record data
Employment or further study	Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey
Highly skilled-employment or further study	Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey

Table 2 – Main diagnostic frames and their content

Diagnostic Frames' content	Diagnostic frame group	Overall use*	Business	Natural Sciences
Way metrics are used	Reflective	15.7%	16.5%	14.4%
Extent and possible use of rankings (REF, TEF, Financial Times, National Student Survey, QS World University, etc.)	Reflective	10.0%	10.7%	8.8%
Importance of resources to run activities and achieve results	Reflective	4.5%	4.1%	5.2%
Managerialism (and related vocabularies) used by the interviewees or reported to be used in relation to performance metrics	Reflective	3.9%	5.0%	2.8%
Possibility of (unfairly) gaming metrics and performance-management systems	Negative	3.4%	3.2%	3.6%
Others		62.5%	60.5%	65.2%
Total		100%	100%	100%

*Percentages based on 3,679 coded arguments where at least one diagnostic frame was identifiable. More detailed data and elaborations are available from the authors upon request.

Table 3 –Motivational frames used

Motivational frames	Overall use*	Business	Natural Sciences
Positive framing cues			
Efficacy	41.8%	42.1%	41.5%
Propriety	20.3%	18.8%	21.3%
Severity	10.0%	12.9%	6.6%
Urgency	5.7%	6.8%	4.5%
Emotional	4.7%	5.0%	4.4%
Negative framing cues			
Propriety	12.7%	10.9%	14.6%
Efficacy	3.4%	3.2%	4.3%
Severity	0.7%	0.3%	1.2%
Urgency	0.7%	0.0%	1.6%
Emotional	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Total	100%	100%	100%

*Percentages based on 558 coded arguments where at least one motivational frame was identifiable. More detailed data and elaborations are available from the authors upon request.

Table 4 – Main prognostic frames and their content

Prognostic frames' content	Overall use*	Business	Natural Sciences
Proposed use of more or different metrics as a solution to current problems/shortcomings	10.9%	11.2%	10.7%
More use of good and comprehensive judgement to inform decisions	7.7%	7.5%	7.9%
More attention to/focus on quality of activities and measures	7.1%	4.7%	9.5%
More extensive or different use of rankings as a solution to current problems/shortcomings	6.4%	6.1%	6.7%
Take actions to increase the efficiency, effectiveness or transparency of current activities in the university (with reference to both performance management and services provided)	6.0%	3.7%	8.2%
Others	61.9%	66.8%	57%
Total	100%	100%	100%

*Percentages based on 519 coded arguments where at least one prognostic frame was identifiable. More detailed data and elaborations are available from the authors upon request.

Appendix

Interview Guide: Senior Academics

1. Could you please tell us what your role and responsibilities are? How long have you been working in your present role (and in the university)?
2. In your view, what is really important to focus on in a modern university? How can this be achieved?
3. With reference to teaching and from your perspective, what have been the most important performance-management changes that took place in the UK HE since the 1990s?
4. With reference to research and from your perspective, what have been the most important performance-management changes that took place in the UK HE since the 1990s?

For each major practice/change identified:

5. In the context of this university and in your perspective, how (if at all) was this change reflected in the university's formal planning documents (strategic plans, etc.)?
6. How was the change explained/justified and promoted by the university? Through what arguments and actions?
7. In your opinion, to what extent were these arguments and actions compatible? Why?
8. How important were these arguments and actions: for you? And for the university? Why?
9. In your view, what changed in the university's life and operation as a consequence of this? How?
10. From a university perspective, what are the claimed impacts?
11. From your perspective, why do you think this change has been promoted and implemented? What is your personal evaluation of it?
12. In your experience, how was the change opposed/challenged? Was there conflict as a consequence of the change? How was opposition/challenge exhibited and managed?
13. How have you and your colleagues' views of this change evolved over time?
14. Do you perceive that the focus of universities, in general, has changed over time? How? And with reference to your specific university?
15. In your view, what is the source of these changes? Why have they occurred/been deemed necessary (or advisable)?